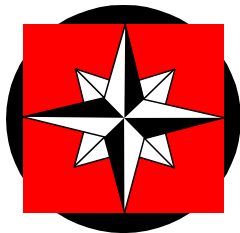


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# NAVY MED NAVIGATOR

## Translators help ease the pain with a familiar voice

### In World News:

U.S. forces made a "clear statement" that Saddam Hussein is no longer in control of his own capital on Saturday by sending two armored units on a daring daytime drive through the middle of Baghdad, U.S. military officials said.

The maneuver came during a day of fierce fighting that saw U.S. Marines and Army forces conduct major offensives across central Iraq. In one skirmish in a marsh on Baghdad's outskirts, Marines with bayonets battled Arab fighters from abroad who said they had come to Iraq to carry out a "jihad" against Americans.

The U.S. incursion into "the middle of Baghdad" was not an attempt to capture large sections of Baghdad, which remained under tenuous Iraqi government control. Rather, said Air Force Maj. Gen. Gene Renuart, "it was a clear statement of the ability of coalition forces to move into Baghdad at the time and place of their choosing."

### In Navy News:

CENTRAL COMMAND (NNS) -- Coalition forces successfully rescued two U.S. Navy aviators after their F-14A Tomcat crashed early April 2 due to mechanical failure.

A combat search and rescue team successfully recovered the pilot and radar intercept officer and took them to a coalition air base at approximately 2:50 a.m. (Gulf Time). Current reports indicate neither crew member was seriously injured.

A combat search and rescue team flew a rescue helicopter to recover the downed crew. Full details of the F-14 incident are unknown at this time and are under investigation.

### In Sports:

Sammy Sosa of the Chicago Cubs became the 18th player to hit 500 career homers, connecting for a solo shot Friday night that ended a winter of waiting and three games worth of drama.

He raised his arms, took his trademark home run hop and ran the bases with his head down, providing the first truly historic moment in the Cincinnati Reds' new ballpark.

"I'm happy about it. There's still no time to celebrate because it's a long season. I've got to keep my focus."

*Story and photos by  
JOSN Erica Mater  
Comfort Public Affairs*

What if you invested all of your time to training and research in a specific job, only to find out you wouldn't be doing anything in that area. Instead, you would be asked to perform a job only a handful of people on *Comfort* can do. Imagine having to do a complete 180 when it came time to do your job. Well, that's exactly what LT Ramzy Azar, MSC, of sick call had to do.

When Azar found out he was coming to *Comfort* in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom he thought he would be doing the job he had gone to school and trained to do.

Azar's job on *Comfort* is to help protect the ship from diseases in the eventuality of Bioterrorism.

Then, when the war started, Azar took on an additional role. Along with his duties in overseeing the disease surveillance and communicable disease control programs, Azar was now going to be one of the few translators for the Iraqi civilians and prisoners of war.

"I didn't think I would primarily be used as a translator. I wasn't prepared for this. I was focused on doing my job instead," said Azar.

Azar was born in Lebanon, which is an Arabic-speaking country. His family fled Lebanon in 1976 and after moves to other countries, him and his family made it the U.S. in 1981.

At Bethesda, Azar said he wanted to use his language skills to help out. Little did he know it would come into play



**Lt. Ramzy Azar, MSC, right, helps doctors communicate with an Iraqi patient in Casualty Receiving. Azar translates for the doctors and Iraqi patients letting them know they are going to be taken care of and are in good hands on *Comfort*.**

in a big way.

"I guess at Bethesda word got around about my language skills, so as the need for a translator became greater on *Comfort*, the more I was utilized," Azar said.

When it came time for Azar to translate he found it to be a little difficult at times.

"My dialect is different than the Iraqi dialect. My biggest concern was that the dialect would be an obstacle or they wouldn't receive me," said Azar.

Fortunately, the Iraqis on *Comfort* did receive him. Azar says the patients have adjusted their dialect and do work with him and the other translators, Seaman Mohamed Kaine and Lt. Salin Tafish, when it comes to communicating.

Translating from Arabic to English and vice versa is only half of the battle for

**Continued on page 3**

# Bonds of Brotherhood

The story of best friends who went to war together and came back alive

*Story and Photo by  
JO2 Ellen Maurer  
Journal Editor*

It was 72 hours after the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Cpls. Samuel Velazquez and Nicholas Elliott, had already been in the middle east region for more than two months. Best friends based together in Camp Lejeune, N.C., the two shared a common love for God, country and the Marine Corps.

Both "Amtrackers" assigned as vehicle commanders of amphibious assault vehicles (which they call "tracks") in the 2nd Amphibious Assault Battalion, Alpha First Platoon, the two Marines were positioned that day with their unit outside of a city in southern Iraq, awaiting mission orders.

Word came that they would be focusing on two bridges. Forming a battalion-size convoy, the unit proceeded towards their goal, knowing they were headed into a possible combat situation. Then, Velazquez and Elliott, in separate "tracks" near each other in the line-up, heard mortar rounds being fired up front.

Velazquez claims that the front tanks had to pull back, so his and Elliott's tracks moved up in the line-up. At this point, Velazquez and Elliott's tracks were the lead element, as all the tracks began to line up in a formation along the road after the second bridge. The ground troops off-loaded, hitting the deck and getting into position.

Velazquez says that even though he and Elliott are in different tracks, they always have a general idea of where each other are located. However, things were starting to get hectic and Velazquez says he wasn't hearing much over the radio, so he decided to peak out of the hatch to see if he could get a visual of what was going on and, specifically, where the fire was coming from.

He looked but he still couldn't tell, so he came back in and closed the hatch, just as a mortar round landed

on the hatch of the tracker. Velazquez went to go check on his crew members near the weapons system area when another round struck the vehicle. This time, shrapnel hit his foot. He struggled to check on his second crewman as another round hit the vehicle.

"I knew God had played a role that day because only He could have made me close that hatch in time," claims Velazquez. "It seemed like every time I moved, a mortar struck the track in the same exact location I'd just been."



**Cpls. Samuel Velazquez (bottom) and Nicholas Elliott take time at NNMC to recover from their injuries sustained during their efforts in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.**

Meanwhile, Elliott had sustained serious injuries. He'd taken shrapnel to the neck and been burned badly on his face and right hand. At this point, most of the Marine ground troops his track carried into the area were dead. He got out and with the help of his surviving ground troops, he loaded all of them up into the back of the track and proceeded to follow the other tracks now pushing back out of the area.

His vehicle didn't get far, though, before it was hit by another round of fire that blew up the inside of the track. The only ones left alive in his track at this point were he and his driver.

Miraculously, with a ruptured Achilles tendon, Elliott managed to climb out of the track and get to safety with

his driver in a nearby house.

"I ran without a tendon, which the doctors are still amazed about," says Elliott. "But I was getting shot at and I just kept thinking that I ain't gonna die here."

Velazquez, still able to operate his track, moved out, picking up other Marines along the way. Once to safety, Velazquez's was medically evacuated.

"The whole way out of there I just kept thinking about the rest of the guys and praying that they'd be okay," says Velazquez. "Mostly though, I was worried about (Elliott). We've pretty much done everything together and that was the first time, in forever it seems, that we were apart."

Velazquez was sent to Germany, where he lay in a hospital bed, still wondering about Elliott. Little did Velazquez know that just one floor above him lay Elliott in the Intensive Care Unit.

"One day I was out for a walk and the nurse mentioned there was another Marine from my unit that had actually been admitted to the hospital before me. My first thought was that it wasn't Elliott. But then, she continued on to say that she thought his last name was Elliott. I immediately knew it was him," says Velazquez.

At NNMC, the two now share a room and deeper bond, having survived a situation from which they both feel only God could have saved them.

"When I found out that Elliott had survived, I just broke down and started thanking God," says Velazquez. "He is more than a fellow Marine or a friend. He is my family."

Now, from their hospital beds, Velazquez and Elliott are watching the war from television screens, surprised and confused at the controversy over military action in the area.

"The best answer I can give those who ask why is to tell them that our objective is to take a madman out of power," says Velazquez.

## Translating, from page 1

Azar. Being one of the few who can communicate with the Iraqis onboard, Azar immediately found himself trying to balance communications with cultural understanding.

"It is a difficult situation with becoming emotionally attached. To them, I have become like an advocate for them. They look to me for help. It immediately becomes personal," said Azar.

Azar also says they are still the enemy and it is hard to find a balance and making sure he doesn't cross that line of getting too personal.

"We want to take care of them and do what's best for them, but we also have to protect ourselves," said Azar.

Around the ship, people have mixed emotions and feeling about having Iraqi patients on *Comfort*. Some feel at odds with taking care of Iraqi patients, and others feel it is their job to take care of everyone regardless of who they are. The line between the groups usually comes from those who deal with the Iraqi patients first-hand and those who do not. Azar says when he first started translating he was a little apprehensive, but that went away with time.

"I learned from other Navy personnel who have been through the 1991 Gulf War and dealt with Iraqi patients. Regardless of what they have done, they are still human, and we must respect that," said Azar.

So how does one cope with the feelings of frustration and apprehension toward the Iraqi patients? Azar says there is no right answer to that question.

"I can't convince anyone to overcome their apprehension. All I can say is that it's the patients, themselves, who can show you they are grateful for the care they are getting and they are the ones who can show their appreciation to everyone who is helping them," Azar said.

Being a translator was not something Azar expected to do, but now that translating is a big part of his job, he says he gets satisfaction in knowing they are comfortable in their surroundings on *Comfort*.

"It makes me feel good to help put them at ease. When you see their expression and you know they are comfortable, you get a feeling of warmth, and to this day that is the one thing I enjoy most about translating," Azar said.

## Comfort Notes

\*The Navy Marine Corps Relief Society fund drive is coming to a close. Check out the latest information on *Comfort's* intranet.

\*Photos taken by the public affairs office can be viewed on the share drive under NEW-PAO, pics. Pictures will now be stored under the week they were taken.

\*Check out the latest edition of NNMC's weekly newspaper, *The Journal*, and read about *Comfort* kids attending the Baltimore Orioles season opener at Camden Yards. You can check this story out and more at [www.dcmilitary.com](http://www.dcmilitary.com).

## Chaplain's Corner:

# Eating

By  
LCDR Mark Koczak  
Command Chaplain

For those of you who have been out on a gray haul or in the field with Marines, you know we all eat very well here on *Comfort*. But this week, take a look at the folks that feed us all each day. There are a large group of them, because with the crew and the patients, lots of folks need to be fed, four times each day.

Gray haul Sailors, you remember mess cranking? The thrill of those 15-hour plus days, the countless meals and trash, and so on. Well, our mess "crankers" (food service attendants) on *Comfort* are only hospital corpsmen. One of the new crewmembers asked a number of weeks ago, where are the deck seamen? Well, we do not have any. So, we take folks from different departments on the ship and they serve 90 days in food service. This includes the laundry by the way.

Now, more education for all of you, these shipmates are not our servants. They have a very specific job to do on the ship. Without them, we would not eat and not have clean clothing. In other words, our relatively comfortable world on *Comfort* would almost stop. Many FSAs on this cruise and on the Baltic exercise had long involved conversations with me about their work. It would not be breaking any confidence to say many were not too happy. It is hard work and constant. They are not working in their rating while their shipmates are especially now as we receive patients. It is understandable, at times, they may not be cheerful. Nor would you, believe me.

Many of you have seen I have worked with a particular group of these folks for almost two months now. At lunchtime every day, I spend my time working with a great team of folks that clean our dishes and take care of our trash after we all eat. Why do I do this?? Not EMI for the chaplain. First, working in the scullery allows me to complete something in a relatively short period of time. I work with a great group of Sailors and yes; I see most of the crew, every day. Of course I only see part of you; you look inside the window and I look outside. An interesting view of life for about two and one half hours. Plus the dishes that I help to wash. And, this is really interesting; I get to see what many of you do not eat.

So for me as the command chaplain, completion of some work, teamwork and seeing you, the crew, are all an important part of my day. I do enjoy it. However at my age, one meal a day is about all that I can take. Do not forget the FSA's and MS's that feed us each day and every day. They are also feeding all of our patients throughout the ship, not an easy task. It is important to eat but just as important to pay atten-



# Where's the Cake?



Photo by HM2 Michael Duff

From left to right: LCDR Cassandra Spears, LTJG Ramzey Azar, and LT Patrick Sipe were promoted to the ranks of CDR, LT, and LCDR, respectively. The ceremony was held in the officer's wardroom and ended with the traditional cake cutting.



Photo by JOSN Erica Mater

The Navy's Dental Technicians rating celebrated their 55th birthday April 2. *Comfort* Dental Techs celebrated the birthday in the dental clinic with cake and fellow DNs. Pictured here are *Comfort's* youngest DN John Waters (left) and oldest DT1 Peter Liebig.

## Marine Sends a Special Thank You to *Comfort*

To: Sailors and crew of *USNS Comfort*,

I am a Marine who was brought aboard March 24. I was in an Amphibious Assault Vehicle in Naziriyah when it was struck by a Rocket-Propelled Grenade severely injuring my right ankle. The explosion killed at least two of my fellow Marines and injured many more. However, there were only four of us that couldn't stay and fight. Our Corpsman immediately took care of us one by one, even while under severe small-arms fire. He was able to get us on another AAV to be taken out when mortars hit that AAV. We all had to get off and fight our way out to a position on the side of the road. We stayed there for some time until our tanks were able to take control of the battle, along with some fierce fighting from many scared Marines.

When we were finally taken out, we were all split up and taken to different field hospitals. Once there, they were only able to do so much for me. I went from field hospital to field hospital before I was transported to *Comfort*.

This is why I am writing this letter. As soon as I got off the flight deck and into casualty receiving, I finally realized I was going to be all right.

I am writing this letter to let all of you know what you have done for us and I am sure many others. I wasn't aware of what the Navy could bring to the ground war. You know the Marine attitude toward other services, but I am the first to admit I was wrong.

I want to thank all the wonderful doctors, surgeons, and nurses who have showed me nothing but profession-

alism, and compassion. Every question I have asked them has been answered. Even legal questions I have had about a child I am having and the rights I have. Corpsman are the most amazing people. They work around the clock to get us what we need. They go to the ship's store and buy us hygiene gear, snacks, and any other little things we need. These few people -you know who you are- have provided me with an experience I will never forget.

You all have gone above and beyond the call of duty for us. Even the cooks have chipped in with their two cents. They have devised a way to make sure Ensure, which tastes like chalk, taste almost drinkable. Even the civilians are getting in there, helping this Marine devise a way to make a wheelchair that supports and conquers the ship's hallways and smoke decks.

I want each and every one of you to know what you do here helps in ways you may never understand. I always took it for granted, but I never will again. I think I speak on behalf of all the Marines here when I thank you all for your hard work and dedication. It has not gone unnoticed by the people who need it most.

Thank you all,  
Pvt. Jason Keough, USMC

*Note: Pvt. Keough was awarded the Purple Heart along with eight of his fellow Marines March 30 by Commander, U.S. Marine Forces Central Command, LT. Gen. Earl B. Hailston, for their actions in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Keough departed Comfort April 4 and is on his way back to the states.*